and Consulate General of India, Jeddah also have introduced the practice of organizing "Open Houses" on every second Thursday of the month to attend to the concerns of Indian expatriates in person.

(c) The Government proposes to start helpline services and organize open houses in Indian Missions in other countries in Gulf in due course.

Calling back of High Commission's officials

1675. SHRI S.S. AHLUWALIA: Will the Minister of EXTERNAL AFFAIRS be pleased to state:

(a) whether it is a fact that during April, 2003 the officials of the Indian High Commission in Mauritius were called back en-mass;

(b) if so, the details thereof; and

(c) the steps taken, if any, to avoid recurrence of such development that warranted en-mass calling back of HCI officials, in future?

THE MINISTER OF STATE IN THE MINISTRY OF EXTERNAL AFFAIRS (SHRI E. AHAMMED): (a) and (b) No. Following the normal procedure for transfer of officials posted in Indian Missions/Posts abroad, three out of eight officers in the High Commission of India, Port Louis (Mauritius), were transferred. Two of them were transferred to other Missions abroad and one officer to Headquaters.

(c) Does not arise.

Foreign Policy with regard to East

1676. DR. VIJAY MALLYA:
SHRI RAJEEV SHUKLA:

Will the Minister of EXTERNAL AFFAIRS be pleased to state:

(a) whether Government would consider evolution of a foreign policy for the East which will benefit the Eastern and North-Eastern States of the country;

(b) whether free trade among the Eastern neighbouring countries with India would be considered;

(c) whether any discussions have been held with the neighbouring countries in the East; and

(d) if so, the details thereof?

THE MINISTER OF STATE IN THE MINISTRY OF EXTERNAL AFFAIRS (SHRI E. AHAMMED): (a) to (d) Yes, Sir. Government have been taking into account the need to benefit the Eastern and North-Eastem States in pursuing foreign policy goals with neighbouring countries in the East bilaterally as well as multilaterally through the regional grouping, Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) consisting of India, Bangladesh, Bhutan, Myanmar, Nepal, Sri Lanka and Thailand.

The BIMSTEC Framework Agreement on Free Trade Area signed in October, 2003 envisages FTA in goods, investment and services. For trade in services and investments, the negotiations shall commence in 2005 and are expected to be completed by 2007.

Bilaterally India already has a free trade regime with both Nepal and Bhutan. A framework FTA was signed with Thailand in October, 2003 and an "Early Harvest Package" of 82 items will commence on September 1,2004. India and Bangladesh are also exploring the possibility of signing an FTA on which two rounds of discussions have already been held. An agreement has been reached with China in June, 2003 to set up a Joint Study Group composed of officials and economists to examine the potential complementarities between the two countries in expanded trade and economic cooperation, as well as the feasibility of an FTA between India and China.

Collection of fingerprints of US visa seekers

1677. SHRI RAMA MUNI REDDY SIRIGIREDDY:
SHRIMATI N.P. DURGA:

Will the Minister of EXTERNAL AFFAIRS be pleased to state:

(a) whether it is a fact that the Embassy of US has recently made an announcement that from April, 2004, two electronic fingerprints would be collected from visa applicants;

(b) if so, the details thereof;

(c) whether it is applicable to visas issued before July, 2004; and

(d) the details of the countries in which its biometrics in visas has been introduced by the people?